(WO)MEN’S VOICES, RIGHTS, AND THE VISION OF THE STATE
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‘Contradiction’ 矛盾 was a hallmark of gender and social relations in 2021. Along with a rising wave of feminism in fields ranging from comedy to podcasting, gender wars erupted in cyberspace between feminists and anti-feminists, with both sides fighting with greater anger and intensity than before.

Not coincidentally, 2021 also saw renewed attempts by the Communist Party of China (CPC) to revive and promote traditional ideals of femininity and promote a more rugged masculine ideal. Party and state policies interacted with increasingly diverse views in Chinese society itself about gender, women’s rights, and men’s roles. As a result, heated debates erupted over the interpretation of men’s and women’s social, economic, and familial roles, as well as their respective rights and interests.

**Feminists Win Battles Against Sexism**

Despite setbacks such as the arrest of the ‘Feminist Five’ in 2015 for campaigning against sexual harassment on public transport, feminist voices have grown stronger in recent years. Following the ‘Occupying Men’s Toilets’ and ‘Bloody Brides Against Domestic Violence’ campaigns of 2012, the #MeToo movement that began in 2018 and the #SeeingFemaleWorkers campaign on Weibo during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Chinese women (and men) continued to speak up in 2021 for women’s rights, interests, and gender equality while calling out those who promoted harmful stereotypes or ideas.

In January, PurCotton, a Chinese manufacturer of cotton products, made an online advertisement that featured a young woman being stalked on the street at night. She pulls out a PurCotton cleaning towelette to wipe off her makeup. Her naked face immediately turns into an unattractive male’s face, the word ‘vomit’ ظفهار appears on the screen and the stalker is successfully scared off. Tens of thousands of netizens, women’s rights groups, and Chinese media lambasted the ad for objectifying
women and for victim-blaming, as well as implying that sexual assault has to do with women's appearance, rather than power and violence.\(^2\) The company eventually removed the ad and issued a formal apology, although as the *Global Times* observed, their ‘two-page statement irked netizens even more, as the rest of the “letter” boasted about the company’s products and brand’.\(^3\)

Also in January, China’s popular video-sharing platform Bilibili streamed a Japanese anime series titled *Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation*. Among other things, the main character, a thirty-four-year-old man, steals a woman’s underwear and, in another scene, uses his mental powers to give an under-age girl an orgasm at a funeral. On 1 February, a top male live-streamer on the site sharply criticised the series, while other users accused it of insulting and objectifying women and trading in sexual exploitation.\(^4\) Many Bilibili users went on to expose a number of other videos containing sexist and misogynistic content, and urged netizens and advertisers alike to boycott the site.\(^5\) Among companies that cut ties with Bilibili were cosmetics brands UKISS and Spenny, sanitary pad vendor Sofy, and skin care company Lin Qingxuan.\(^6\) This push, together with a campaign of criticism from feminists on China’s social networking site Douban,\(^7\) ultimately led to Bilibili removing from its platform the four episodes that had been shown and stopping the release of a fifth.

The spotlight fell on another company the following month. On 24 February, the thirty-one-year-old (male) celebrity talkshow host Li Dan 李诞 posted an ad on Weibo for Ubras, a Chinese underwear brand that calls itself the ‘pioneer of One Size underwear’ and claims in its advertising that it is about ‘embodying the true and natural beauty of you’.\(^8\) The ad described the company’s products as women’s ‘lifesaving garments’, allowing career women to ‘win easily [without any effort] in the workplace just by lying down’.\(^9\) While the ad was riffing on a popular slang term for slacking off, the implication was that women achieved workplace success by using their sexuality.\(^10\) One Weibo user commented: ‘I find it particularly disheartening when it comes from a lingerie brand
that’s supposed to empower women.’ This backlash grew into calls for a boycott of Ubras, leading to apologies from both Li and the company.

A similar controversy, in which seemingly no-one responsible realised the offence being caused until there was an uproar, surrounded an exhibition of work by Song Ta 宋拓 titled ‘Uglier and Uglier’ 校花 (Campus Flowers) at the OCAT Shanghai art museum in June. Song, a thirty-three-year-old male artist, had secretly filmed 5,000 young women on a college campus. He edited the footage into a seven-hour video, displaying their photos with numerical scores given for attractiveness. The exhibition (which ran from 28 April to 11 July 2021) went viral online and stirred public outrage, as did Song’s comments from a 2019 interview in which he said it was unusual ‘to find so many ugly women at only one school’. On Weibo, the hashtag ‘SongTaCampusFlowers’ 宋拓校花 attracted around 100 million views by mid-June, with users condemning it as ‘violating people’s privacy’ and a ‘disgusting display of Song’s misogyny’. The museum eventually acknowledged that the work was ‘disrespectful and offensive to female friends’ as well as a possible invasion of their privacy, made apologies to the public, removed the exhibition, and closed the museum temporarily. These incidents exposed the sexism emanating from the rapid marketisation and commercialisation of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). However, they also manifest rising awareness around gender inequality and Chinese feminism’s growing strength.

Sexual harassment cases are also associated with China’s corporate drinking culture. After a female Alibaba employee detailed how she was sexually assaulted by a client and raped by her male boss during a work trip, police failed to file charges. Only after 6,000 Alibaba employees signed a letter demanding action against sexual misconduct in the workplace did the company fire the boss in question — but not before also dismissing ten employees who had helped publicise the woman’s accusations on social media. This scandal not only mirrors Kate Manne’s depiction of the ‘himpathy’ phenomenon (‘the flow of sympathy away from female victims towards their male victimizers’) in her book Down Girl: The Logic of
Misogyny, but also underlines the close ties between power, male privilege and violence against women.\textsuperscript{17}

The picture is further complicated by the heated debate around the arrest of Chinese-Canadian singer-actor Kris Wu 吴亦凡 in late July on charges of rape. Some claimed the arrest of the thirty-year-old singer, about whom rumours and allegations of sexual harassment had been swirling for two years, was a major win for women’s rights activists. Others, including many of his fans, denied his misconduct and defended him, demanding that brands including Porsche and Bulgari reinstate him as a brand ambassador and even suggesting they fundraise for Wu’s legal proceedings and band together to break him out of detention.\textsuperscript{18} This led to Internet and media regulators intensifying their crackdown on ‘unhealthy’ celebrity culture and online fan clubs;\textsuperscript{19} authorities removed thousands of ‘problematic’ accounts related to Wu on social media.\textsuperscript{20} While far more serious than allegations of sexism, Wu’s case blurred the battle lines between feminists and anti-feminists, revealing the anger, anxiety and apprehension of the public when influential individuals’ actions are suddenly put under a microscope, and scrutinised by a large number of people.

**The Cyberspace Gender Wars**

As feminist voices made themselves heard, an increasingly heated ‘gender war’ erupted in cyberspace. Feminists used terms such as ‘straight man cancer’ 直男癌, while men threw around insults such as ‘feminist whores’ 女权婊, and women accused other women of being ‘married donkeys’
As arguments intensified around women’s rights, men’s rights and feminism, netizens divided into various camps.

One ongoing debate centres on ‘surnaming rights’. In April 2020, a woman shared on Weibo how she sued for divorce after her husband refused to give their baby her surname. While her post, on 26 March, generated more than 240,000 likes and has been shared more than 47,000 times, others described it as extreme ‘feminism with Chinese characteristics’, arguing that women demand equal rights but do not bear equal responsibilities. The following month, some feminists mocked the internet celebrity and comedian Papi Jiang as a ‘married donkey’ after a Weibo user named ‘Enhe-I’ pointed out that Jiang’s newborn baby had inherited her husband’s surname. The post went viral, and the corresponding hashtag became one of the most searched in May. In October, television host Zhang Shaogang was criticised following his interview with the father of Chinese actress Jin Sha on the variety show Meeting Mr Right on Mango TV. Zhang told Jin Sha’s father it was embarrassing to hear him say his daughter had her mother’s surname. The incident triggered heated discussion on Weibo, with the corresponding hashtag generating 400 million views, and many comments indicating Zhang had ruined his public persona.

Equal surname rights are enshrined in China’s Civil Code (2020: Article 1,015). Traditionally, children in China inherit their father’s surname, ensuring the continuation of the paternal line. Although women typically and historically kept their own surnames after marriage, they were considered part of their husband’s families. Because they could not continue their own family’s ancestral lines, they were thus seen as less valuable than sons/men. In the wake of the One-Child Policy, which was introduced in 1979, and a subsequent rise in female infanticide, the CPC introduced the 1980 Marriage Law, which stipulated that ‘[C]hildren may adopt either their father’s or their mother’s surname’.

In August 2021, published statistics revealed that 7.7 percent...
of babies born in the PRC the previous year had their mother's surname; the percentage was even higher in the cities.\textsuperscript{31} Others used the combined surnames of their parents.\textsuperscript{32}

Yang Li 杨笠, a female comedian who appeared on the stand-up comedy series \textit{Rock & Roast}, sparked another controversy, in September 2020, when she joked about men and their egos: ‘How can he be so average, yet so full of confidence?’ 他那么普通却又那么自信？After men trolled her viciously, another comedian cautioned her not to test men's limits. Yang replied: ‘Do men even have limits?’ 男人,有底线吗? She gained many (mostly, but far from exclusively, women) supporters, but online, men abused her for being what they called an aggressive ‘female fist’ \textit{nüquan} 女拳 (a derogatory term that is a homophone for 女权, ‘female rights/power’, but is the equivalent of ‘feminazi’). They denounced her for ‘sexism’, ‘man-bashing’, and ‘creating gender-based antagonism’.\textsuperscript{33} In response, Yang’s supporters accused the critics of being ‘oversensitive’, ‘fragile’, and ‘lacking a sense of humour’.\textsuperscript{34} Joe Wong 黄西, a Chinese-born American comedian who appeared on the \textit{Ellen DeGeneres Show} and the \textit{Late Show with Stephen Colbert} before moving back to China in 2013, supported Yang: ‘It totally makes sense for Yang Li to take a well-deserved piss out of men, whose voices are consistently elevated above women’s in society.’\textsuperscript{35}

Such controversies reflect the narrowing pathway for the growth of feminism in China. Although Mao Zedong 毛泽东 famously said that ‘women hold up half the sky’, in the new China, the CPC is not comfortable with any movement that comes from the grassroots or challenges authority and it censors social media hashtags like #MeToo along with ‘sensitive words’ including ‘feminism’ and ‘LGBTQ’.\textsuperscript{36} Where the battle lines might be drawn was suggested by comments from another, far more conservative, male comedian and law professor, Chu Yin 储殷, who wrote that ‘gender politics from the West’ threatened ‘the unity of the working class’ and fanned ‘hatred against straight men’.\textsuperscript{37} He also posted a video on Douyin (China’s TikTok) in which he asked how special a man needed
to be to please Yang Li, saying, ‘[Y]ou’re probably the ugly one after you wash off your makeup.’ (Yang has said that ‘a joke can only get laughs for one reason. Because it resonates.’)38

In late March 2021, Zhang Kunwei 张坤纬, a twenty-eight-year-old graduate from China’s prestigious Tsinghua University, posted a dating profile with his photo on Douban. He labelled himself ‘an ordinary man’, despite his qualifications and income of more than 50,000 yuan (A$10,000) per month — six times what the average public service employee would earn in a year — and previous work experience at JPMorgan and Google.39 He had given up the high life, he explained, to teach in his hometown in Shanxi province. The post went viral, with more than 400 million views on Weibo in ten days.40

Unexpectedly, Zhang was ‘body-shamed’ and interrogated by netizens on Douban. Some female users denigrated Zhang, who was overweight, as ‘ugly’丑 and ‘greasy’油腻 (a word used by many women to describe middle-aged ‘mediocre and sleazy’ men, typically chubby, sweaty, and/or narcissistic).41 Others quoted Yang Li’s famous catchphrase, questioning why ‘he is so mediocre but still so confident’.42 Zhang was also called out for presuming that women would be attracted to his wealth, even though he had supposedly given all that up for the simple life of a teacher. Another Douban user commented: ‘Who cares if you are highly educated or not? Are women with doctorates less humiliated? Don’t you know how harsh it [the society] is on women’s bodies?’43 Others defended Zhang and called out
his ‘feminazi’ critics for their double standards. Zhang himself responded by writing an article bemoaning the ‘unprecedented pressures’ faced by men, whom women valued for ‘working hard and earning money’, and how hard it was for a man like him to find a partner. The conflict exposed the mounting pressures and anxieties faced by men and women around their looks, gendered expectations, and marriage in contemporary China.

**Enter the State**

The state closely scrutinises feminist online campaigns and rhetoric. The Chinese government has removed various feminist accounts in previous years and shut ten feminist forums on Douban in April 2021 alone, including ‘Can’t break a broken can’ 破罐子不摔 and ‘Catchup gender equality sisters’ 性别平等姐妹. It has also banned the phrase ‘6B4T’, which derives from radical feminist forums in South Korea. ‘6B’ refers to not having sex with men, not having a boyfriend, not marrying men, not having children, not buying sexist products, and offering support to single women. ‘4T’ refers to rejecting standards of beauty, hypersexual depictions of women, religion, and pop ‘idol’ culture. The movement encourages women to step away from ‘the influence of male-centred political culture, and then form a full range of female culture and female power’.

The Chinese government has many reasons to crack down on these forums. First, a ‘female-centred culture’ poses an implicit threat to China’s male-dominated political order. Second, given the existing gender imbalance in the population (105.7 males to every 100 females in 2020), if an increasing number of women choose not to marry, even more millions of men will be ‘squeezed out’ of the marriage market, resulting in social instability and almost certainly increased numbers of sexual offences, including human trafficking for prostitution or forced marriages.

Furthermore, the CPC wants women to have more babies, not fewer. Data from China’s 2020 national population census show the country’s
birth rate has tumbled to its lowest level since the 1960s despite the easing of the One-Child Policy; there were 12 million newborns in 2020 — down from 14.7 million in 2019.47 On 31 May 2021, China launched its Three-Child Policy, with the intention of triggering a baby boom. Whereas the One-Child Policy had a rocky start because many people, especially in rural areas, wanted more sons, this policy faces resistance for the opposite reason. On Weibo, of the 31,000 people who responded to a poll by the state’s Xinhua News Agency that asked whether they were ready for the Three-Child Policy, 28,000 selected ‘I am not considering it at all’.48 While welcoming the freedom to have more children, opponents believed it was ‘too little, too late’, especially given the soaring cost of raising children.49 A number of women worried that having more children could make it impossible to achieve work–life balance and result in them facing further discrimination in an already male-oriented job market.50

Even mild versions of feminism challenge the Party’s increasingly conservative vision for Chinese women; on multiple occasions, Xi Jinping has reminded the nation of the virtues of traditional families and femininity. In 2013, he encouraged women to take the initiative to care for the elderly and shoulder the responsibility for educating children.51 In 2016, he described ‘wifely virtue’ and ‘motherly kindness’ as exemplary qualities for Chinese women.52 In 2019, Xi said women had a unique role to play in the preservation of family values, while on International Women’s Day in 2021, Xi exalted motherhood by saying: ‘Without women, there would be no human race and no society.’54

A ‘Masculinity Crisis’

Having set out what it expects of women, the Party has also laid out strategies for men. On 8 December 2020, China’s Ministry of Education issued a notice in response to a proposal from Si Zefu, a top policy adviser objecting to what he saw as the widespread ‘feminisation’ of male
adolescents. According to Si, many young boys had become ‘weak, timid, and self-abasing’. He claimed this trend would endanger the survival and development of the nation itself unless it was ‘effectively managed’. The official notice set out a plan for cultivating masculinity in boys, from kindergarten to high school. The stress was on building physical strength: increasing the number of physical education classes, recruiting and training more gym teachers, vigorously developing sports like soccer, and testing students more comprehensively in physical education.

On Weibo and other platforms, discussion focused on the dangers of the ‘feminisation’ 女性化 of young boys — exemplified by the pretty-boy Chinese male actors and pop stars dubbed ‘little fresh meat’ 小鲜肉, whose female fans refer to them fondly as ‘wife’ 妻子, ‘sister’ 妹妹, and ‘princess’ 公主. Others urged parents to do more to encourage boys’ masculinity. One commented: ‘[M]en are not like men, but a bunch of fake women, what do you think this nation will look like?’ The implicit message was that effeminate boys weakened China, echoing the popular saying that ‘the strength of a country depends on its youth’ 少年强则国强, from Liang Qichao’s 梁启超 article ‘On the Young China’ in February 1900.

At the same time, feminist voices were quick to label the government’s message sexist. One comment cut straight to the heart of the matter with the question: ‘Is “feminisation” now a derogatory term?’ Some argued for a healthy diversity of human character and individual difference. Others questioned the necessity of the proposal, pointing out that for all the attention given to ‘building up boys’ masculinity’, there was seemingly ‘no time to popularise sex education’ or teach young people the wrongs of ‘sexual harassment’. Ironically, traditional ideals of masculinity in China largely centred on the idea of ‘being delicate, pale, and pretty’, which had little to do with the kind of ‘hard men’ the Party seeks to promote today.

This is in fact just the latest ‘masculinity crisis’ to concern the Party in the post-Mao era. Worries about whether Chinese men were ‘manly’ enough became a social anxiety in the 1980s. In 1985, First Blood became one of the first Western films to publicly screen in China, sparking
discussion about why China had no cinema idol like Sylvester Stallone. The following year, Shanghai playwright Sha Yexin 沙叶新 stirred the pot of unease with his play *In Search of a Real Man* 寻找男子汉. This led to an agonised debate that simmered on through the 1990s about whether Chinese men had enough ‘steely yang energy’ 阳刚之气. Anxiety about Chinese masculinity erupted again in 2016 around the gender-specific textbook *Little Little Manly Man* 小小男子汉, published in Shanghai, which aimed to help boys aged ten to twelve understand gender differences and sexual psychology and enhance their life skills. It aimed to change ‘the tendency of male students to lack masculinity, and be outperformed and overshadowed by girls at primary and secondary schools’. Praised by some, it was criticised by others for propagating gender stereotypes. By this point, the Party had determined that masculinity was a social problem in need of state intervention. In 2019, the State officially banned male artists wearing earrings, with censors awkwardly having to blur men’s ears in photos and even television programs. In September 2021, cultural authorities banned the appearance of ‘girlie guns’ 娘炮 (who were defined as ‘men whose appearance, personality, posture, behaviour, mentality, and facial expressions are distinctly feminine’) on both television and streaming sites so as to purge ‘morally flawed’ acts. There are now various training programs and vacation camps aimed at strengthening boys’ physical strength, toughness and resilience, and popular self-help books such as *Putin: The Perfect Man in the Eyes of All Women* (2013), in which the author, Liu Xiang 刘翔, presents Russian President Vladimir Putin as a role model for Chinese men seeking to boost their masculinity.

Living in an era that is heavily influenced by ‘flowery men’ 花样美男 culture (popularised by ‘soft masculinity’ or ‘metrosexual’ males who take care of their physical appearance through ‘feminine’ means such as using makeup and other beauty products or even having cosmetic surgery) and fan culture modelled on that in the J-pop and K-pop worlds, as well as more mainstream visibility of feminism, will China’s younger generation of boys choose to follow the ‘hard masculinity’ model prescribed by the state?
Conclusion

Overall, despite an ongoing crackdown, censorship and vicious trolling, 2021 witnessed the mainstreaming of feminism in China as women like comedian Yang Li used their popularity to put gender-related questions into the public sphere, and more and more women came forward to call out sexual harassment, discrimination, and body-shaming via a variety of e-platforms including podcasts, Douyin videos, and online forums. A number of young men, too, took up the feminist cause of defending women’s rights and calling for gender equality. It was highly polarising. Feminists who ‘opened fire’ on men or ‘crossed the line’ incurred the wrath of the patriarchy, from online trolls to the ruling authorities. Men were caught between staying ‘average but confident’ and being mocked by feminists or embracing their feminine side and going against the will of the state.

When the powerfully built woman athlete Gong Lijiao 巩立姣 won China’s first gold medal for shotput during the 2021 Tokyo Olympics, China’s state-run CCTV host described her as a ‘manly woman’ 女汉子 and even asked her whether she had plans for ‘a woman’s life’. Gong, causing her supporters to despair at the seeming necessity of conforming, replied she would lose weight and get married and have children as ‘it’s the path one must take in life’.67 It is uncertain who will be the winner in this tug-of-war between feminists and the masculinist patriarchy. But feminism has taken root in China, and the feminists will not be easily silenced.